

house, housing, sachet

בֵּית

1. Statistics

Torah: 345. Nebiim: 1314. Ketubim: 675. Total: 2334.

As a container qualifying adoption in this work, only once in the Nebiim.

2a. Literal Use

Though it is one of the commonest words in the Bible, בֵּית is less often used in a literal sense than one might expect. When this is the case, it designates a building the walls of which were made of clay bricks (Exod. 1:14; cf. Job 4:19) or, if more money could be spent, hewn stones (1 Kgs 6:7; Ps. 118:22, etc.). For many other structural elements, especially the roof and the pillars supporting it, wood was employed (cf. e.g. 1 Kgs 5:22-23). בֵּית might designate a house where a man and his family dwelled (Deut. 6:7), but also a palace (Gen. 12:15; Jer. 39:8), a temple (Exod. 23:19; 1 Sam. 31:10), or part of such a larger complex (e.g. 2 Kgs 23:7).

2b. Figurative Use

In all languages of the world ‘house’ is a root metaphor. It immediately evokes the idea of complex construction, the notion of protection against the outside world, feelings of love, tenderness and companionable family life that are experienced in it. As such, the house has become a rich source of networks of interrelated metaphors which Lakoff and Johnson have described by the keywords CONTAINER and BUILDING (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

It is not always simple, however, to distinguish between literal and figurative use. For example, one of the most common uses of בֵּית is to designate a tribe, a dynasty or the nation as a whole, ‘the house of Israel’, for example. Yet a writer could deliberately fall back on the literal meaning to stress the perishable nature of this ‘house’, as is the case in Jer. 18:6 (see also Job 4:19). The metaphor is temporarily suspended to become an object of clay again. As will be explained below, בֵּית was occasionally used as a neutral metaphor for several different types of casing. One might compare the use of ‘house, housing’ in modern English.

In this handbook it is not necessary to discuss all metaphorical uses of the term ‘house’. We shall confine ourselves to the passages

where utensils might be involved.

In Isa. 3:18-23 an enumeration is given of jewelry and cosmetics of the women of Jerusalem. The means to enhance their beauty will be taken away because of their wanton behaviour. In v. 20 **בְּתֵי הַנְּפֶשׁ**, ‘houses of the נְפֶשׁ’ are mentioned. This expression is paralleled by the word **לְהַשִּׁים**, ‘amulets’, but ‘to work intuitively from a straightforward rendering of the words to arrive at some kind of amulet’ (Williamson 2006, 281) is not commendable. Probably **נְפֶשׁ** means ‘scent’ here, as in Prov. 27:9. This is strongly suggested by the distant parallelism with **בְּשֵׁם** ‘perfume, spices’ in Isa. 3:24. These scent ‘houses’, then, were little sachets (→ **צָרוּר**), filled with perfumes like myrrh (Cant. 5:1), to attract their lovers (rather than to restore their spirits after fainting, contrast Astley 1929, 79-83; Driver 1937, 69-70). Such sachets were worn around the neck (Keel 1984 and 1986), like the amulets (**הַלְהַשִּׁים**) mentioned immediately after. Customary translations like ‘bottles’, ‘flasks’, or ‘phials’ must be abandoned as anachronisms.

If we accept this rendering ‘spice sachets’ also for **בְּתֵים** in 2 Kgs 23:7 there is no need for the dubious etymologising based on Arab. *batt* anymore.

In the description of the table to be used in the tabernacle, **בַּיִת** refers to the holders for the poles (**בְּדִים**) that were used to carry the table (Exod. 25:27; 30:4; 37:14, 27; 38:5) and in the description of the tabernacle to a holder for bars (**בְּרִיחִים**) (Exod. 26:29; 36:34). In 1 Kgs 18:32 **בַּיִת** is apparently used as a neutral word ‘container’ for an unusual trench able to hold two seah-measures of seed. Similarly, Ezek. 1:27 describes the unusual sight of a fire contained in a kind of housing. In all these cases it is unlikely we are dealing with utensils.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested as a utensil.

4. Cognates

In several Semitic languages **baytu* occurs in meanings comparable to ‘casing, housing, container’.

AKKADIAN: *bītu* ‘house’ can also designate a ‘container’ (CAD (B), 292, sub 4). Used for the holder of the lamp (*bīt nūri*, Salonen,

Hausgeräte, Bd. 1, 134), as well as for small bottles containing a kind of perfume, oil or other cosmetic fluid (Salonen, *Hausgeräte*, Bd. 1, 118-9; Pappi 2008, 573), a woollen sack (*bīt lubūri*, Salonen, *Hausgeräte*, Bd. 1, 179) or the holder of the spindle ((*bīt pilaqqi*, Salonen, *Hausgeräte*, Bd. 1, 153). The special meaning of ‘scent’ for the word שִׁנְפֹּשׁ is supported by Akkadian *nipšū* ‘scent’, Gilg. 11:304 (see also Von Soden, *AHW*, Bd. 2, 792; *CAD* (N)2, 248). The word seems to be derived from *napāšu* ‘to breath’.

OLD AND IMPERIAL ARAMAIC: Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, 156: *by(t)* ‘house’; 163: ‘receptacle’, but the reading and interpretation are uncertain.

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: In rabbinical Hebrew בֵּית can designate receptacles, like a case for tephilin and an ink-pot. Cf. Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 1, 224-5; Jastrow, *DTT*, 167-8.

CLASSICAL ARABIC: *bayt* can have the meaning ‘case, box, covering, sheath’ (Wehr, *DMWA*, 84; Dozy, *SDA*, t. 1, 131).

ETHIOPIC: Geez *bēt*, Dillmann, *LLAe*, 536: ‘receptaculum, theca’.

5. Ancient Versions

The ancient versions were simply guessing after the meaning of most of the technical terms used in Isa. 3:18-23. This also applies to בֵּיתֵי הַנְּפֹשׁ in 3:20. Only *v* with *olfactoriola*, ‘scent-bottles’, comes close. The renderings of the versions in the case of Exod. 25:27 are discussed by Houtman 2000.

6. Judaic Sources

See above, under Postbiblical Hebrew.

7. Illustrations

Keel 1984 and 1986.

8. Archaeological Remarks

Keel 1986, 68, states that the בֵּיתֵי הַנְּפֹשׁ in Isa. 3:20 must be compared to the pouch of myrrh in Song 1:13, worn between the breasts. This pouch was probably made of cloth so that the scent could spread through the air. Keel calls it an amulet and thinks that it consisted of two pieces of cloth, wrapped around different

things, and joined together by a horizontally placed needle. In the bundles were fragrant flowers, hennah, lily, fruits, seed, resin, myrrh, frankincense, etc. (*LÄ*, Bd. 4, 910-1).

Dalman (*AuS*, Bd. 5, 339) describes the בֵּית הַנֶּפֶשׁ also as containers for oil or scent.

[Further comments will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

The common word בֵּית was sometimes used as a metaphorical designation of receptacles or casings. In Isa. 3:20 the word designates a sachet filled with aromatic spices that women used to hang between their breasts by way of perfume.

10. Bibliography

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3,20 Duftgehäus, Riechfläschchen; Ez. 1,27: das ein Gehäuse hat rings' – Houtman 2000: C. Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT), vol. 3, Leuven 2000, 396 – *KBL* Keel 1984: O. Keel, *Deine Blicke sind Tauben: Zur Metaphorik des Hohen Liedes* (SBS, 114/115), Stuttgart 1984, 108-15, 186-7, Abb. 119-121 – Keel 1986: O. Keel, *Das Hohelied* (ZBK, 18), Zürich 1986, 68-71 – *LÄ*, Bd. 4, 910-1 – Lakoff & Johnson 1980: G. Lakoff & M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago 1980 – *LHA*, 107: 'domus . . . 2b) receptaculum rei, locus, vas, anulus alqd continens, capiens ets.' – *NIDOT*, vol. 1, 655-7 (657: 'receptacle, container, holder', בֵּית הַנְּבִיט 'perfume bottle') – Pappi 2008: C. Pappi, 'Salbe, Salbengefäß', *RLA*, Bd. 11, Lief. 7/8, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008, 572-4 – Salonen, *Hausgeräte*, Bd. 1, 118-9, 134, 153, 179 – Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 192: 'receptaculum, locus, spatium rerum inanimatarum' – Williamson 2006: H.G.M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1-5* (ICC), London 2006, 281.

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